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Countering Extremism:  
Learning from the United Kingdom Model

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Program on  
Extremism

## **Program on Extremism**

The Program on Extremism at George Washington University provides analysis on issues related to violent and non-violent extremism. The Program spearheads innovative and thoughtful academic inquiry, producing empirical work that strengthens extremism research as a distinct field of study. The Program aims to develop pragmatic policy solutions that resonate with policymakers, civic leaders, and the general public.

## **About the Author**

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*The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author, and not necessarily those of the Program on Extremism or the George Washington University.*

## **Abstract**

In July 2015, the British government made significant changes to the existing Prevent program, an early intervention, de-radicalization, and education scheme designed to reduce the number of people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism. This paper provides insight into the inner workings of Prevent. Specifically, it focuses on the different components of Channel, a multi-agency panel that handles referrals of and develops support packages for young people deemed at-risk of radicalization.

## **What is Prevent?**

In the wake of the July 7, 2005, bombings in London, the British government decided that a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy was needed to stem the rising tide of extremism in the United Kingdom (UK). In 2007, a counterterrorism strategy called CONTEST was launched. CONTEST was divided into what is referred to as the “Four Ps”<sup>1</sup>:

- Protect - To strengthen our protection against terrorist attacks;
- Pursue - To stop terrorist attacks;
- Prepare - To mitigate the impact of a terrorist attack; and
- Prevent - To reduce the number of people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism.

Prevent is a unique strand of work in that it operates in the pre-criminal space and seeks to provide early interventions for young people at risk of becoming extremists or being targeted by extremist recruiters. It also seeks to raise awareness of extremism-related issues among statutory partners, informing them of the support available for young people while disrupting the activities and recruitment efforts of extremists.

Prevent is designed to target all forms of extremism and is guided by the following working definition of extremism: “Vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs.”<sup>2</sup>

In July 2015 section 26 of the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 came into effect, rendering Prevent a statutory duty for local authorities, education providers, the health sector, police, and prisons. This, in effect, means all of these sectors are now obligated by law to implement the Prevent strategy. In the words of the guidance document, they are duty-bound to have “due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism.”<sup>3</sup>

In practice, this means the specified authorities affected by the duty have to take preventing extremism work very seriously, and either allocate this responsibility to a dedicated individual or ask someone to take it under their remit. To ensure effectiveness, authorities have to partner with other local and central government agencies, raise awareness of the issues internally, and establish governance and oversight mechanisms whereby Prevent work can be scrutinized. Therefore, schools or local authorities previously reluctant to do Prevent work now have no choice but to get involved.

To run alongside Prevent, the British government launched a counter-extremism strategy on the October 19, 2015.<sup>4</sup> This strategy introduces a range of new measures to tackle extremism including:

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<sup>1</sup> Her Majesty’s (HM) Government, “2010-2015 government policy: counter-terrorism,” Home Office, May 8, 2015, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/2010-to-2015-government-policy-counter-terrorism/2010-to-2015-government-policy-counter-terrorism>.

<sup>2</sup> HM Government. “Prevent Duty Guidance: A Consultation,” Home Office, December 2014, [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/388934/45584\\_Prevent\\_duty\\_guidance-a\\_consultation\\_Web\\_Accessible.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/388934/45584_Prevent_duty_guidance-a_consultation_Web_Accessible.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> HM Government. “Revised Prevent Duty Guidance: For England and Wales,” Home Office, July 16, 2015, [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/417943/Prevent\\_Duty\\_Guidance\\_England\\_Wales.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/417943/Prevent_Duty_Guidance_England_Wales.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> HM Government, “Counter-Extremism Strategy,” Home Office, October 19, 2015, [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/469171/51774\\_Cm9145\\_Final.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/469171/51774_Cm9145_Final.pdf).

- Targeted legal powers to limit the influence of extremist individuals, groups, and premises used by extremists;
- A new and more intensive de-radicalization program that could be mandatory in certain cases;
- A nationwide network of community based organizations that counter extremism at the grassroots level;
- A review of how to encourage integration in isolated communities; and
- A new partnership between industry, government, and the public to tackle extremist content online.

Like Prevent, this strategy will focus on all forms of extremism. Additionally, a 5-million pound fund will be made available to support groups tackling extremism in local communities.

### **Prevent at the Local Level**

In respect to the extremist threat level, local authorities in the UK are divided into three tiers, with those in tier one deemed as facing the greatest risk of extremist activity. Authorities in tiers one and two are given funding by the Home Office to hire a Prevent lead. In most cases, this individual also employs additional staff and works closely with the police, relevant teams within the local authority, and other local statutory and/or voluntary partners in order to implement Prevent locally. The work often involves monitoring extremist activism in the area, offering guidance and support for statutory partners, and arranging support packages for vulnerable individuals while avoiding negative publicity from sections of the press. Police forces in high priority areas also employ Prevent officers that come under Specialist Operations unit 15 (counterterrorism command).

Prevent can vary in its implementation and the manner in which it is enforced can be influenced by the local political culture. These differences usually concern the extent to which the local authority engages community or faith groups—while some local authorities shun them completely, others rely on them quite heavily. However, the work of most Prevent leads can be broadly broken down into three categories:

#### *1. Ideology*

Prevent leads ensure that extremists are not free to promote their ideology in the local area and use all legal means available to disrupt their activities. This can involve denying them public platforms by cancelling their events at publicly owned venues and preventing them from holding demonstrations or running street stalls by denying them permission.

#### *2. Institutions*

Prevent counselors work with local institutions to ensure that these organizations have the knowledge, training, and awareness to effectively implement Prevent-related work. This often involves working very closely with the education sector to train teachers and bring in external counter-extremism resources they can use with pupils.

Most Prevent leads rely on Workshop to Raise Awareness of Prevent (WRAP), a CD-based training product containing videos and case studies that can be embellished with group

exercises. Building strategic relationships is also key within this sub-strand of work since many referrals for young people deemed at-risk of becoming extremists emanate from the education sector.

### *3. Individuals*

When individuals have been identified as being at-risk of becoming extremists, the Prevent lead needs to work with local partners to put together a tailored support package for the individual concerned. This often relies upon existing local services as well as the Channel program, a multi-agency panel that makes decisions about young people deemed at-risk of radicalization.

#### **How Channel Works**

As alluded to above, Channel is a multi-agency panel that accepts referrals from a wide range of sources for individuals deemed at-risk of radicalization. Referrals tend to be for individuals who have expressed extremist views or are suspected of having been targeted for radicalization. These individuals are subsequently reported to Channel, a process termed a 'Channel referral.'

While the panel that evaluates the case is led by the local authority in respect to decision making, the police, alongside input from partners working in children's services, youth offending, health, mental health, probation, and other stakeholders deemed relevant, do the bulk of the work. The role of the panel is to:

- a) Identify individuals at risk;
- b) Assess the nature and extent of that risk; and
- c) Develop the most appropriate support plan for the individual concerned.

A Prevent lead will raise awareness of Channel among local statutory partners they work with and offer support to. As a result, frontline workers will be cognizant of Channel and are expected to use common sense when making referrals. For example, if a child makes a seemingly disturbing, out of character comment of an extremist nature, the issue can often be resolved through a private conversation or parental involvement. However, if a child is continuing to make disturbing comments and preaching an extremist narrative to other pupils, then the teacher may decide that external support is required and report that child to Channel through the local authority Prevent team or the local police Prevent team directly.

Once a referral has been received, the police Prevent team will perform a number of background checks in order to gain a fuller picture. This often involves checking health records, children's services records, the criminal history of the individual and the family, and other background checks. Once these have been completed the referral is ready to be discussed at a local Channel panel.

At the panel meeting—occurring either once a month or once every two months depending upon demand—the facts of individual cases are presented by the police officer with authority over the various checks, and members of the panel discuss the extent to which they think the individual of concern is being radicalized. If radicalization is not deemed to be the issue, the case is taken off Channel and transferred to other service areas. If the panel decides the

individual is being or has been radicalized, a decision about the best course of action must be made.

This decision often boils down to whether or not the individual would be well suited for mentoring via what is referred to as an intervention provider (IP). Some individuals may be too young for mentoring to be effective. Others may be deemed too dangerous and simply unreceptive to any external input due to their character or family circumstances.

The Home Office keeps a register of vetted IPs, individuals with experience working with young people and knowledge of extremism-related issues, and hence able to discuss extremist ideology in an informed and critical manner. If an individual is deemed suitable for mentoring they are then approached by the police at their home address, the background of the referral is discussed, and the mentoring is offered. Since the mentoring is voluntary, the individual who has been referred can choose not to engage at all. However, experience has shown that most do engage and a working relationship between the IP and referral is established.

This mentoring can go on for weeks or months since it is results-orientated rather than time restricted. The IP is expected to provide regular feedback reports to the police and, in some cases, attend a Channel panel in order to discuss progress. The IP is expected to assess the extent to which the individual is radicalized and offer counter-messaging so the individual becomes critical of extremist ideology to the point he or she is no longer at risk of becoming an extremist. At this point they are taken off Channel.

Individuals who are deemed extremist yet refuse mentoring, or are deemed unsuitable for it for any reason, are placed in Prevent Case Management (PCM). When in PCM, officers discuss their case at monthly PCM meetings and perform checks every six months for a two-year period to ensure the individual has not been involved in extremist activity. Mentoring is also offered to individuals who have served time for Terrorism Act-related offences when they are due to be released or shortly after their release as part of their rehabilitation and reintegration.

Since the start of 2012, approximately 4,000 individuals have been referred to Channel, 1069 from London and around half under 18 years-old. Referrals have increased by 58% since the start of 2015 as Prevent transitioned from a voluntary to a statutory program. The rise of Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and their much-vaunted social media propaganda is believed to be at least partially responsible for this rise.

### **Challenges for Prevent**

Prevent is operating in an ever-changing world in which local dynamics are influenced by global geo-politics. Currently, some of the key challenges for Prevent officers are:

**Elective Home Education (EHE)** – An increased number of parents are choosing to pull their children out of mainstream education and have them home-schooled. These children often end up at poorly run and resourced supplementary schools that offer a very narrow curriculum in which exposure to extremist views is more likely. UK legislation regarding EHE is currently too vague and weak for effective action to be taken against such parents. The school watchdog Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills

(OFSTED) is starting to inspect many of these supplementary schools and seeking to enforce better standards.

**Targeted ISIS Propaganda** – ISIS is increasingly targeting teenage boys and girls with their propaganda, and a number of young girls in particular seem to have been seduced by their promise of a better life in Syria. This means Prevent officers need to look at resources that are suitable for young girls as well as young men, and work with schools to ensure appropriate counter-messaging reaches them. However, this can be complicated by the fact that parents and siblings can be sympathetic to ISIS in some instances.

**Sports** – Some extremist recruiters are becoming less brazen in their efforts and using more subtle techniques like engagement through sports. Extremist groups either arrange sporting events or set up clubs that offer archery, table-tennis, or soccer to attract a crowd of young people. They then preach to these youngsters prior to or after the sporting activity. Therefore, Prevent leads need to be more critical in their assessment of such groups and activities.

**Preventing Prevent** – The UK has a burgeoning anti-Prevent lobby led by an alliance of hard-leftists and Islamist extremists. These individuals are experiencing a degree of success in the higher education sector and with sections of the press. Essentially, they peddle negative Prevent stories and seek to tarnish Prevent as an anti-Muslim witch-hunt that is criminalizing all Muslims, turning them into a suspect community.